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ABSTRACT

An evaluation was conducted to examine the process by which the Yellowhead School Division in Alberta (Canada) had integrated children with disabilities into regular classrooms, and to describe the current status of that process. A list of 16 steady objectives was developed. The evaluation, which took place from January through June 1991, covered the school years 1986-87 through 1990-91. Findings were reported in a framework developed by M. W. McLaughlin (based on the Change Agent Study) in 1990 that found that, for the educational process to be effective and for long-term policy directives to be realized, the following conditions have to exist: (1) the policy distinguishes between content and process; (2) implementation dominates outcome; (3) innovation contributes to the organic life of the classroom; (4) commitment of leadership is essential; (5) local variability is the rule; (6) embedded structures are more relevant to the teacher than formal structures; and (7) resources do not predict outcome. An examination of characteristics of the Yellowhead schools in light of these requirements leads to the conclusion that a model for integration operates in the elementary schools, but that no working integration model exists for the high schools. High school teachers lag behind elementary school teachers in concept acceptance. Issues in developing a secondary school model are summarized, including preparation for life, individualized instruction, record-keeping, training and support, and involvement. One figure presents the evaluation model. (SLD)

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Synthesizing the Evidence:

Evaluating Mainstreaming as a Change Process

by

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Political and Legislative Context

It is important to understand the political and legislative context in which this evaluation of mainstreaming occurred. The Premiers Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities was established in 1988 as a result of a discussion between the disabled athlete, Rick Hansen, known for his Man in Motion tour, and the Honourable Don Getty, Premier of Alberta. The Council had the legislated power to review, recommend and influence government policies and the coordination of services toward enhancing the status of persons with disabilities as equal Albertans. It could connect consumers, advocates, agencies and other interested people with all levels of government and it reported regularly to the Premier and to the Legislative Assembly.

The Alberta School Act (1988) provided that children with special needs had access to the education system and to an appropriate program, as follows:

> **29** *(1)* *A board may determine that a student is, by virtue of the students behavioural, communicational, intellectual, learning or physical characteristics, or a combination of those characteristics, a student in need of a special education program.*
>
> *(2)* *A student who is determined by a board to be in need of a special education program is entitled to have access to a special education program . . . .*
>
> *(3)* *Before a board places a student in a special education program it shall*
>
> *a)* *consult with the parent of that student, and*
> *b)* *where appropriate, consult with the student*

However, it was the view of members of the Premiers Council that a number of barriers generally prevented children with disabilities from fulfilling their potential and attaining equal status. These barriers included fragmented and uncoordinated services, funding issues, inadequate teacher preparation and inadequate teacher support.

The Council published its Action Plan in 1990 which, among nine major policy areas, identified education as the key to future change. The Council's objective for education read as follows:

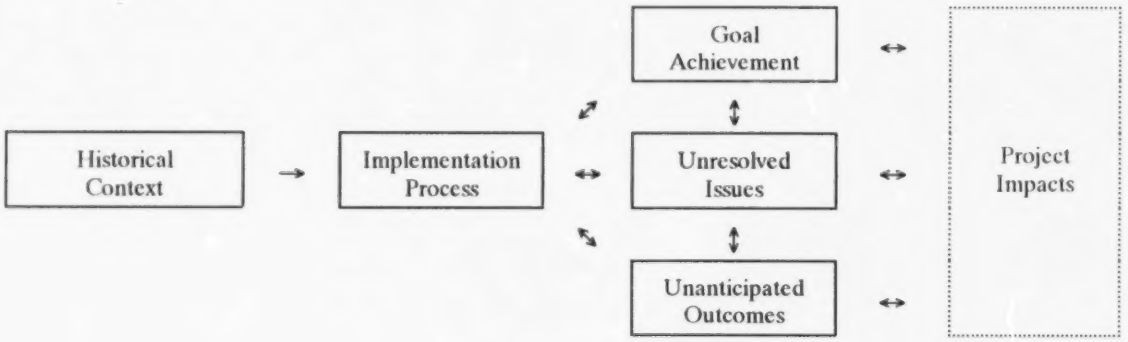
By the year 2000, all children will have, as their right, access in their home communities, in their neighbourhood schools, to the same quality of education which is available to all other students.

Yellowhead School Division No. 12 is a rural, public school system located in north central Alberta just east of the Jasper National Park boundary. It has a total area of approximately 34,000 square kilometres and serves 5,200 students from Early Childhood Services to Grade 12 in a total of 17 schools, 10 of which are located in the two major towns and the rest are in smaller towns or rural areas. As the first school district in Alberta to adopt a policy of full integration of students with special needs, Yellowhead was of particular interest to both The Council and the Provincial Department of Education, known as Alberta Education. As a result, they jointly funded a descriptive review of the change process which had occurred in the Division and that study is reported in this paper.

Evaluation Model

The purpose of the evaluation was to examine the process by which the Yellowhead School Division had integrated children with disabilities into regular classrooms and to describe the current status of that process. To guide evaluation activities, the evaluation model in figure 1 was employed.

Figure 1 Evaluation Design Model



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The study tended to focus on the historical context and implementation process of the five-year old policy but early signs of outcomes and impacts were also sought. A series of 16 study objectives were developed in response to client need and the model imperative. The study period covered the school years 1986-87 to 1990-91. The evaluation occurred between January and June, 1991.

Methodology

A multi-method approach was determined to be the most effective way of capturing at least some of the many facets of this complex and all-pervasive process called integration. Methods included document review, a literature review, a file review, the development of case studies, on-site observation, interviews with many stakeholder groups, a division-wide survey of all school-based staff and an assessment of the social-emotional-behavioral adjustment of students with special needs and a control group. Each is briefly reviewed below.

1. Document Review

All relevant political and legislative documents were reviewed to provide touchstones for the evaluation, linking it to time, place and issue.

2. Literature Review

Recent literature was searched for articles of interest related to change, integration or mainstreaming, teacher inservice and policy implementation. While articles were sought for both empirical evidence and experience, the majority which were located reported district experiences with the integration process rather than actual research studies.

3. File Review

Documents were reviewed at both Central Office and in the case study schools (see below). They included correspondence, reports, audits, presentations, papers, calendars, notices and other miscellaneous information. In general, they fell into three different groups: initial implementation activities at the district level, district audits of individual schools and school integration stories.

4. Case Studies

Six of the 17 schools were selected by senior administrators and the evaluator based on the following criteria:

1. School Level
2. School Size
3. Location
4. Experienced Principal (i.e. not new to school)
5. Whether School had a Special Education Focus Previously

While these criteria led the discussion regarding school selection, the fact that it was also a political process could not be ignored by the evaluator. At her request, the Superintendent corresponded with each of the selected school principals explaining the nature of the study and asked them if they wished their school to be involved. They all agreed.

5. **Observation**

A series of school visits occurred between January and May 1991 and each case study school was visited at least twice. Classrooms where students with special needs were integrated were observed.

6. **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with a number of stakeholder groups. These included program initiators at Central Office and on the Board of Trustees, program implementors at both the Division and in case study schools (including administrators, teachers and teacher aides), and those who could comment on program outcomes including parents and other stakeholders identified during the evaluation process.

7. **Survey**

A 73-item survey was developed and administered to all school-based personnel in the Division, including administrators, classroom teachers, classroom support teachers, teacher aides, clerical staff and custodial staff. In all, 274 surveys, or 64%, were returned. Limitations related to possible unknown characteristics of the 36% who did not reply, the retrospective nature of many of the survey items, and the repeated concern of respondents regarding confidentiality. Staff appeared to be particularly sensitive about potential identification despite the fact that surveys were returned individually in stamped, self-addressed envelopes to the office of the evaluator which was located several hundred miles out of the school jurisdiction.

8. **Student Assessment**

In each of the six case study schools, an assessment of both children with special needs and a control group was conducted using the Child Behavior Checklist, Teacher's Report Form (Achenback and Edelbrock, 1986). The two groups were compared on three indices including academic performance, adaptive functioning and behavior problems. The assessment was limited by teacher observation and perception, the fact that data were collected for all students with special needs but only a sample of regular students, teacher fore-knowledge regarding student membership in either of the two identified groups, and the snapshot nature of the assessment as opposed to a time series.

The Change Agent Study Revisited

A literature review was conducted to explore the topic of integration or mainstreaming as it related to the change process. Of particular interest was a 1990 study by McLaughlin which revisited a Rand Corporation study on change in schools in the 1970's. At that time the so-called Change Agent Study had influenced thought on the change process in schools and McLaughlin explored the longevity of that change in terms of policy directions. The Rand analysis had found that adoption of change was only the beginning of the story and that while many changes were adopted, few were successfully implemented and even fewer continued over the long run. His conclusions included the following:

1. Implementation dominated outcome. The actual education methods determined implementation and continuation only to a limited extent. What a project was mattered less than how it was carried out. To promote effective practice, policies should distinguish between content and process; a focus on one without the other could lead to reform failure.

2. Active commitment of district leadership was essential to project success and stability in the long-run.

3. Policy could not mandate what mattered. Local capacity and will to embrace policy change, local expertise, organizational routines and supporting resources determined the ability of practitioners to innovate.

4. Local variability was the rule; uniformity was the exception. The local response rather than policy input continued to influence practice. Change continued to be the problem of the smallest unit.

5. In some cases belief could follow practice where mandated involvement occurred.

6. Project scope needed to be sufficient to challenge teachers and kindle interests but not overwhelming in terms of implementation. The structures most relevant to teachers might not be at the policy level but rather, embedded structures such as professional networks, school departments, school-level associations or groups of colleagues might be more important to teachers than policies in determining classroom practice. Strategies rooted in these natural networks could be more effective.

7. Removing constraints such as inadequate materials, preparation or resources did not ensure more effective practice. Rather, factors which enabled practice included the following:

    a) Productive collegial relations
    b) Organizational structure which promoted open communication and feedback

c) Leadership the managed opportunities for professional growth and nurtured individual development
d) A shared mission and school-wide goals
e) Regular feedback about performance
f) Involvement of teachers in decision making about curriculum
g) Encouragement of collegial interaction
h) Multiple opportunities for professional growth

Study Findings

While each component of this complex study resulted in specific conclusions which were reported in the various chapters of the evaluation report, McLaughlin's findings provided a framework within which to assess and synthesize study findings. For the educational change process to be effective and for long-term policy directives to be realized, McLaughlin had found that the following conditions had to be in effect.

1. The policy distinguishes between content and process.
2. Implementation dominates outcome.
3. Innovation has to contribute to the organic life of the classroom.
4. The commitment of leadership is essential.
5. Local variability is the rule.
6. Embedded structures are more relevant to teachers than formal structures.
7. Resources do not predict outcome.

The Yellowhead findings were synthesized and reported within that framework.

1. The Policy Distinguishes Between Content and Process

With the implementation of integration in the Yellowhead School Division, the Student Services Department was dismantled, all Special Education classrooms and resource rooms were closed and the responsibility for educating special needs students was devolved to the regular classroom teacher. This strong statement made by senior administration terminated at one stroke the following practices: the identification and labelling of special needs students, the use of extensive assessment and testing of students, student placement anywhere but the regular classroom, the

complex referral process and off-site responsibility for decisions about special needs students.

However, because of the administrator's belief that policy should reflect practice, no concrete policy was developed to replace the old one during the developmental years of the process. Instead, Division activities were guided by an informal series of statements and evolving definitions. The *informal* policy which emerged was roughly as follows:

> *There will be integration in age-appropriate settings in regular classrooms in neighbourhood schools for all special needs children and appropriate resources will be provided.*

The lack of a clear model or models meant that this informal policy or vision was subject to varied interpretation and muddied by unforseen practical considerations. Everyone in the Division knew that they had to have integration in their school but no one was too sure how to do it. The case studies revealed that those schools which developed clear policies at the school level early in the process tended to be more effective in the implementation of integration.

It was interesting to see that by the time a formal policy was developed, in Year Five of the project, the concept had already advanced to that of "inclusion" rather than integration, and so the policy did not actually reflect practice but was again a statement of vision.

Thus the integration policy was not clearly defined in the early stages of the project at the Division level, except through the act of dismantling Student Services. Instead the policy was informal, emergent and visionary. While the content and meaning were clear, the process was not and instead evolved painfully through confrontation and trial and error.

2. Implementation Dominates Outcome

The decision regarding integration was made by senior administration in Yellowhead with little or no input from the future implementors of the policy. This lack of involvement in the initial stages, and the resulting lack of ownership, was to be costly to the Division in terms of time and personnel.

In the case study schools, it took staff at least three of the five years to get over the hostility engendered by lack of involvement in the early stages, and bitterness remained in some staff members at the time of the study. It was also apparent that some schools retained more bitterness overall than others. However, the survey revealed that after five years, attitudes toward integration were significantly more positive in elementary teachers than in those in high school. The implementation process had occurred in stages, beginning at the early elementary level and working its way upward, so in fact elementary teachers had actually had longer to get used to the concept. Having tried it, they were better able to see its benefits. Not

surprisingly, it was in the elementary case study schools that models of integration had been successfully implemented. The high schools, which lingered behind in terms of both acceptance and implementation, were still demonstrating pockets of both active and passive resistance by the end of Year Five.

The evaluation results indicated that, as McLaughlin suggested, belief can follow practice when a change is mandated. However, several years' worth of fire fighting and conflict resolution could have been avoided if a more consultative style of decision making had been employed. In addition, the change caused a significant impact on staffing and related costs. After five years of implementation, only one quarter of school-based Special Education staff remained at the same school, and one third had moved out of the Division altogether. While there is no way of knowing what the turnover would have been if the policy had not been implemented, it had an impact on the functioning of individual school staffs as teams.

The survey revealed that the most significant issue for teachers was training. In devolving responsibility to them for the education of special needs children, they felt that training should have been provided as well. Over three quarters of staff indicated that training had not been sufficient either initially or during the implementation period and that further training was still required. While the Division had made efforts to provide inservice to a variety of groups of teachers over the years, starting with those in ECS and Grade 1, principals and high school teachers had received very limited amounts of training. In addition, no special accommodation was made for staff turnover, so that new teachers moving into the Division were not brought up to date on evolving integration processes. As one teacher commented rather bitterly, one year you needed four years of Special Education training and the next year you needed none. Somewhere between these two extremes lay the appropriate amount of training for working with special needs children in regular classrooms, but the evaluation findings showed no evidence that appropriate levels of training had been identified.

3. Innovation Contributes to the Organic Life of the Classroom

Integration strikes at the heart of life in the classroom in that it directly influences all students. The three areas which this study explored were academic performance, social or adaptive functioning and behavioral development.

Teachers did not think that integration had exerted an impact on the academic performance of either special needs or regular students. However, slightly more than half of the parents of special needs students at the elementary level indicated that their children had demonstrated positive academic change; those with children in high school were divided in their views between positive and negative academic change. The student profiles revealed that 70% of special needs students were demonstrating academic difficulty; however, that left 30% who were not.

Integration was seen by both teachers and parents as having a positive impact on the social development of both groups of students. Survey results indicated that staff had

seen positive change in regular students in terms of cooperation, tolerance and understanding, while the social development of special needs students improved overall. Parents of both groups of students at the elementary level reported positive change in the areas of self-confidence and the ability to interact with others; parents of students in high school noted positive change in the area of friendships. The student profiles indicated that 45% of identified special needs students had adaptive functioning at a range low enough for clinical remediation but also indicated that 10% of the control group had similarly low adaptive functioning abilities but were receiving no special attention. Again, it should be noted that 55% of special needs students were functioning social within a normal range.

Finally, behavioral development was considered for both groups of students. Staff viewed integration as having little impact on the behavior of regular students and in at least three quarters of cases had a positive impact on the behavior of special needs students. However, they also indicated that behavior problems generally were increasingly prevalent in the schools. Student profiles indicated that about 40% of special needs students had significant behavior problems within a clinical range; 60% did not. At least one student in the control group in five of the six case study schools also demonstrated behavior in the clinical range with no evidence of remediation taking place.

When the three indices of academic performance, adaptive functioning and behavioral development were combined, 47% of special needs students in case study schools demonstrated significant problems on either two or three indicators; 10% of regular students in the control group did as well.

Integration at Yellowhead was intrinsically related to the organic life of the classroom. Despite the lack of quantifiable data over time available for the evaluation, the series of snapshots taken in this study indicate that integration had a positive impact on students' social and behavioral development. The impact on academic performance was less certain although the parents of elementary special needs students viewed it positively. What also emerged, and what was perhaps more important, was that identification procedures were not completely reliable as some control group students appeared to have the same needs as those identified as having special needs.

4. Commitment of Leadership is Essential

The commitment to integration on the part of senior administrators in the Yellowhead School Division was unquestionable and started with the belief of the Superintendent, based on personal experience and research, that integration was educationally sound and "good for kids." However, that commitment had to be transferred to middle management for the concept to be implemented and this process was not well orchestrated. For some principals, their first awareness of the move to integration happened during budget meetings when they realized that their Special Education classrooms would be closed the following year. Only one inservice

activity for principals on the topic of integration was documented during the five-year period.

The analysis of case study schools revealed that schools with significant administrative support for integration tended to move ahead more quickly. The schools with integration policies and procedures which provided regular communication channels to solve problems and come up with creative solutions had staff members who appeared to have positive attitudes toward integration and appeared to achieve positive results.

School-based leadership was a critical factor that was largely overlooked in the implementation process at Yellowhead.

5. Local Variability is the Rule

Administrators were well aware of this maxim when they encouraged local schools to develop their own integration models. By doing away with a centralized model (Student Services), it was clear that schools were to try to solve these problems themselves. What resulted, however, was a lack of standardization in such areas as definition of terms, the identification process of special needs, the involvement of parents, reporting and the role of the new Classroom Support Teacher (formerly the Resource Teacher).

In one case study high school, none of the identified special needs students had behavior problems in the clinical range yet staff had indicated to the evaluator that 25% of the total student body had significant behavioral or motivational problems. Academic problems were reported to be more prevalent among elementary special needs student than among those in high school, yet school visits revealed that some high school students were not enrolled in any core subjects at all.

The lack of clarity regarding implementation in the original integration vision resulted in a plethora of integration models. While local values, traditions and clientele needed to be accommodated, the basic program structure should have been provided for all schools to adopt. Without it some schools floundered, some forged ahead and some tried to forget the whole thing. Local variability needs to occur within the parameters of an agreed-upon structure. In the evolutionary process that was integration at Yellowhead, this was not the case.

6. Embedded Structures are More Relevant to Teachers than Formal Structures

While the need for clear policies and models must be stressed, it is also apparent that teachers react most favorably to informal persuasion through such activities as observation, role modelling and shared experience.

In Yellowhead, a number of teachers were involved in an unrelated professional development research project which fostered professional growth in a collegial, non-

threatening way through the use of self-help groups. As an unanticipated outcome, these teachers found that the networking that occurred in those groups was useful in developing integration strategies for their classrooms.

Many teachers teach despite policy rather than because of it and it is that stubborn independence and individuality which make the best teachers successful. It is important, therefore, to tap into informal networks such as this to encourage innovation rather than relying solely on formal professional development or interest groups.

7. Resources Do Not Predict Outcome

McLaughlin suggested that resource adequacy was not a good predictor of success which had more to do with the will to succeed than anything else.

In Yellowhead, resources were not saved by terminating Student Services; rather they were re-deployed. Two new Curriculum Directors replaced four to six Central Office staff in that department and the rest went into the general instructional pool, resulting in a slightly lower pupil-teacher ratio. Additional teacher aide time was added when the requirement became evident and the Division subsequently found that its non-recoverable costs had increased by $40,000 to $50,000 per year.

Overall facility costs due to integration-related renovations totalled only $60,000 over five year. Transportation costs were not significant as regular school buses were used in most cases to transport students with special needs. In fact the Division had somewhat fewer children with special needs than the provincial average. Few medically fragile children lived in the Division most likely because of its rural nature and the absence of specialized health facilities or services.

Teachers perceived that resources in all areas but transportation to be inadequate to support the concept of integration but when questioned about the frequency with which they had accessed available resources both within the Division and within the community, their response was that it was infrequent.

Overall, there was no indication that integration was under-resourced at Yellowhead. In fact, teacher aide time was increased, the pupil-teacher ratio was lowered, Resource Teachers were re-deployed as Classroom Support Teachers, and psychological testing was provided where necessary by a contracted local psychologist. Other community resources, such as speech therapists, were available through local channels but were rarely accessed. Students who formerly would have been in a Special Education classroom or a Resource Room were now invisible at the Divisional level unless they required a special aide.

Costs became embedded in the regular instructional budget and were difficult to identify thus also making it difficult to draw conclusions about the relation between resources and outcomes. Perhaps this lack of an identifiable link in itself supports McLaughlin's finding that resources do not predict outcome.

Observations

The unique nature of the Yellowhead School Division and the qualitative, multi-faceted approach to this evaluation did not lend themselves to generalizations or to recommendations for other school districts apart from the anecdotal evidence provided above. However two final observations were made about integration at Yellowhead, as follows:

1. **There was a model for integration operating in elementary schools in Yellowhead**

   The case studies revealed sufficient commonalities at the elementary level to conclude that a flexible model had emerged at the elementary level. Specific characteristics included the following:

   a) Administrative support in terms of facilitating communication about integration, encouraging staff training in that area and modelling a commitment to the concept of integration that went beyond mere acceptance.

   b) A shared mission statement or set of goals about integration that was developed at the school level with considerable staff input.

   c) A Classroom Support Teacher who not only had some training in dealing with children with special needs but who was also a master teacher, a good communicator and a negotiator with a non-threatening way of working with regular classroom teachers.

   d) Regular classroom teachers were given the final responsibility for the preparation of Individual Educational Plans for children with special needs although they consulted with a variety of others including the Classroom Support Teacher, the principal, the counsellor and the parents.

2. **There was not yet an integration model operating in high schools**

   Despite some examples of good teacher cooperation, successful student integration and appropriate program modifications, no case study school at the secondary level had a working integration model. Overall it appeared that staff members were several years behind elementary teachers in terms of concept acceptance. While the cultures of elementary and secondary schools are markedly different, there is no reason to suggest that an appropriate integration model cannot be developed for high schools. What is clear, however, is that it will *not* be the elementary model.

   Some of the issues which should be considered in the development of a secondary model include:

a) **Preparation for Life**

Special needs students may be receiving their last formal education at the secondary level so it is the responsibility of the school to ensure that appropriate life and work skills are being provided.

b) **Individualized Instruction**

In a classroom where individualized instruction occurs, student proceed at their own pace. In this context, special needs students can function in a non-threatening environment at their own academic level.

c) **Record-Keeping**

Issues concerning assigning grades and graduation requirements need to be explored.

d) **Additional training and support**

Teachers of lower-level versions of academic subjects and teachers of options course such as Industrial Arts must receive appropriate training and in-class support for the delivery of individualized courses and assistance with special needs students.

e) **Involvement**

Secondary teachers must have the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process to define an integration model at the secondary level along with appropriate policies and procedures.

To conclude, the Yellowhead School Division embarked on a courageous and rewarding journey to integrate special needs children into regular classrooms. Generally, despite start-up pains, the goal of integration was being met at the elementary level. It was likely, however, that the process would take from 12 to 15 years to be completely operational as a new generation of children moved through the system. After five years, the first few classes of integrated students were knocking on the doors of the secondary school but the system had not yet determined how best to meet their needs. This issue of a high school integration model had to be next on the Division's agenda for action.

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